

# TEACHING TIPS

## Screw model has advantages over inverted pyramid

By Edward J. Smith  
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Journalism students have been screwing up news stories for years. This ubiquitous tendency has generally been met with professorial scorn and correspondingly poor marks.

However, times change and it's now possible, even probable, that a screwed up news story will gain the teacher's favor and the all-important A.

This change results when the traditional inverted pyramid news writing model is replaced by the screw model. The screw news writing model features more understandable and realistic attributes than the inverted pyramid and affords the professor and students opportunities to create untold numbers of puns, bad jokes and analogies that, at least, wake up sleepy classes and engage drifting minds. A second attribute of the screw model is that *it works* and helps to explain the organization of news stories in a more practical way than the inverted pyramid.

The screw model rejects the idea, inherent in the inverted pyramid, that news story information is readily rankable with respect to importance. Any newsman who has sat through a five-hour, 10-agenda item city council meeting knows that often arbitrary selections are made of what items should be at the top and what items should be at the bottom of the story. Generally, the idea that news story information is rankable by importance is indefensible in practice. Obviously, in some stories major facts stand out, but in others they do not. But even in cases

*Editor's Note: Teachers who would like full-size copies of these models with which they can make overhead transparencies should write to the author at the School of Journalism, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Okla. 73019.*

where a few items of information are clearly of greater importance than others, somewhere along the continuum of items they begin to level out and exhibit approximately equal importance.

The screw model acknowledges this reality. As shown in both Figure 1 and Figure 2, the screw model adopts a top portion of the inverted pyramid but then levels off along the shank of the screw. This leveling illustrates the likelihood that information will, in fact, reflect equal importance. The shank of the screw continues until clearly discernible minor details are evident. The dotted line suggests that more or fewer minor details may be used according to story and newspaper policy demands. The sloping threads of the screw suggest transitional features necessary in good news writing.

These models illustrate two commonly used organizational schemes. The single feature lead model (Figure 1) describes a news story with a lead that emphasizes a single news feature. This feature is supported by background, situational or explanatory information. In the case of a speech this would be the occasion and description of the speaker, if a meeting story it might be the "reasons" for the meeting and if a murder story it might be the murder tally for the town to date. Along the shank of the screw additional first feature details are discussed with new features and details following (with perhaps equal importance) to the point where clearly minor details are used.

The multiple feature lead model (Figure 2) illustrates a lead that features three items, the appropriate supportive information and then rapid return with details on the three featured items. Additional features and details continue until minor details are used.

Two spinoff attributes of the model's use are the demands for the students to clearly isolate and identify the separate features clearly in their minds and the stylistic freedom afforded by the approach.

FIGURE 1

Organization of News Story with  
Single Feature Lead

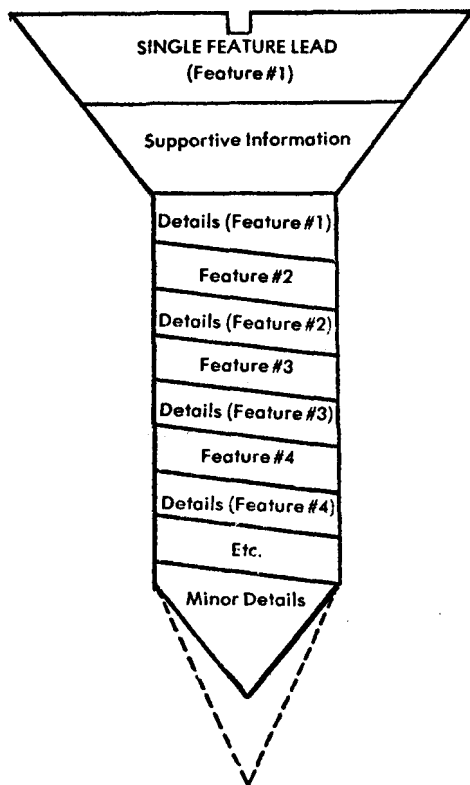
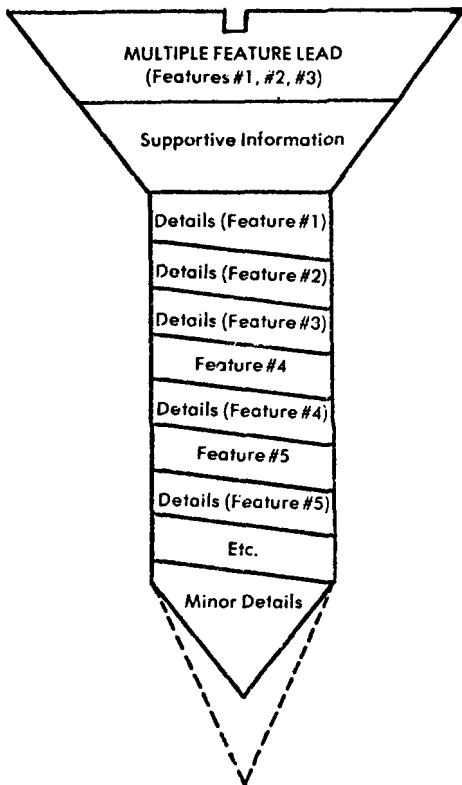


FIGURE 2

Organization of News Story with  
Multiple Feature Lead



Before the student writers are able to "fill in" a model of this sort they must isolate and define the various features with which they will build the story. To do this they must spend time understanding the information they are writing about. If they are writing a speech story, for example, they must isolate some number of subjects, features, topics or themes that the speaker addressed before they can organize the story. The model suggests a pre-writing exercise in which these "themes" of the speaker's are identified. Another pre-writing exercise plugs them into the model in various ways to determine how well they fit.

This suggests the second spinoff attribute of stylistic freedom. If the features are of equal value (in most cases many

of them are), then what criteria are to be used in determining the order they are used? Generally, the answer can be style. That is, they should be organized in a way that makes the story flow best. They should be organized in a way that reads (and writes) comfortably and they should be organized logically so the reader most easily understands what is being said.

In many journalism courses organizational models are used just once. This is unfortunate because good models help students visualize how stories should and should not be structured.

In the last weeks of a basic news writing course, these models were used to illustrate how the teacher and the students organized a speech story. Stories, good ones and some not so good, were

compared with the models using an overhead projector. Asked to analyze representative stories flashed along side the models, students found fragmented features, minor details at the top of stories and lead features that were not supported or provided with detailed support. The teacher's version suffered some but survived the student's evaluations. Models can be beneficially used throughout many writing courses to help students evaluate their own performance.

Perhaps these models will help students screw up a few more news stories and make a few more As.

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## Unit on business fills big gap in reporting class

By Keith Shelton  
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**A** Harris poll of college students a few years ago showed that 61 percent thought the profit motive was unnecessary and 85 percent felt there was virtually no competition in big business.

It also showed that 44 percent failed to see how wage-and-price controls limit personal freedom.

Such lack of understanding in the average student is bad enough. In a journalism student, it can be a yawning educational gap. Whether it is the sports writer who must write about the economics of sports, the religion writer who must write about charitable giving, the education writer who must talk about tax bases or the po-

*This article describes how a teacher integrated discussions on business into a general news writing class. For a discussion of a more extensive, full-course approach to the problem of teaching journalism students the basics of business operations, see John N. Rippey, "Course abates student fears of covering business news," in next April's Journalism Educator. For another fairly recent discussion of a full-fledged course in the subject, see Gerald E. Auten, "Missouri economics course is specifically for J-majors," Journalism Educator, Vol. 32, No. 3, April 1977, pp. 12-16, 80.*

litical writer trying to wade through corporate books looking for illegal contri-butions, today's reporter, regardless of his field, needs to know a lot more about business and economics.

Born out of my own efforts to design at least one 50-minute lecture on business for students in my newspaper reporting and writing class was a 25-page summary of basic information. It has a seven-page appendix on "How to Read A Financial Report," based on information from Merrill Lynch.

The idea was not to make business writers out of my reporters, but to give them the basic information they will need to be journalists who are knowledgeable about the fundamentals of business, how a business is born, how it thrives or dies, how it works.

I make no claim to expert knowledge in this field myself, which I found to be an advantage. I have never been a business writer full time, so—to a degree—I was educating myself. My only claim is that I have researched the area and have come up with what I think are the needed basics. Invaluable help was provided by Al Altwegg, business editor of *The Dallas Morning News*, the New York Stock Exchange, the Federal Reserve System, and other such sources.

One thing I decided at the beginning was that this instruction should not be ideological—neither the ultra-conservative view that the society exists to serve business nor the ultra-liberal view that all business exploits the people and is evil—should be allowed to intrude on the factual presentation. How the stock market works and the difference between puts and calls is not ideological and should not be allowed to scare the student who thinks you are trying to indoctrinate him.

So, with the idea that this is what I think the journalism student in general, and not just the business journalism student, should know, and with the understanding that the information should not be ideological, this is what I developed:

Starting with "How A Business Works," I developed five major areas—money and its history, the stock market and how it works, economic indicators, the govern-